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Let's talk

Contents

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LANGUAGE AND WORLD VIEWS

Each language is a unique world of thought
Australian linguist Christopher Moseley explains the crucial importance of preserving languages and presents the main innovations of the *UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger.* 4

The monkeys, the scorpion and the snake
Stone is petrified speech, water is language laughing, the sown seed, a promised word: every element of reality is an integral part of Toro Tegu, currently spoken by some 5,000 Dogons in the north of Mali. 6

Preaching in the wilderness or banking on the future?
After prolific production in French, the Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop decided to write in Wolof.
For a poor, multilingual population with an oral tradition, books are not a priority. Yet African writers who express themselves in their national languages are becoming more and more numerous. Interview. 8

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

An epidemic is threatening indigenous languages
Some languages are spoken by very few people but are still very much alive, while others have been preserved by the isolation of their speakers. Marleen Haboud from Ecuador explains these apparently paradoxical phenomena. 11

The secrets of Machaj Juyai-Kallawaya
Developed down through the centuries, Machaj Juyai is a "secret language" still spoken by a few families of traditional herbalist healers, the Kallawaya, who live in the Bolivian Andes. They propagate a now-threatened ancestral knowledge, which UNESCO is working to safeguard. 13

The saga of the Ainu language
Several thousand years old, the Ainu language spoken in northern Japan was dying out due to political pressure from the central government. At the end of the 20th century, this trend was reversed. While Ainu's future is still not guaranteed because it isn't taught in schools, the resurgence of interest is undeniable. 15

LANGUAGES AND SOCIAL COHESION

Languages and immigration: bilingualism is an asset
To deprive immigrant children of their mother tongues is to create situations of conflict between the family model and the social model, which is to scorn their identities. If their languages and cultures were respected by school systems, they would develop a better esteem of themselves and of others. 18

The Indian dilemma
With some 1,650 languages and more than a million schools including all levels, India faces a serious challenge: to ensure national cohesion without compromising the interests of regional languages. It has invented the "three language formula", difficult to implement. 21

Kyrgyz: an "emerging" language
In the streets of Bishkek, two languages are found side by side on advertising billboards, at newsstands and in conversations. After gaining its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan adopted Kyrgyz as its national language and kept Russian as the official language. Linguistic results are mixed. 23

Front cover:
"The Thief of Words" (2008) by Jaume Plensa (Barcelona, Spain), one of the most important international sculptors.
© Jaume Plensa / Courtesy Galerie Lelong

Editorial

As societies slowly realise just how closely related they are to one another – often when violence erupts because of some crisis or another on the planet – their relationship to development is also beginning to change. We can no longer push forward our own growth at the expense of others, in a spirit of competition. Progress is now intimately linked to the harmony of all, so strong and complex are the interactions between all aspects of life on Earth.

As a result, the principle of "intellectual and moral solidarity", enshrined in UNESCO's constitution as the basis for the peace and prosperity of mankind, is more relevant today than ever. Everything is played out in the minds of men.

However, nothing happens in the minds of men without the intervention of language, or languages. Humans only operate mentally, and even emotionally, through languages.

If men and women are to have their say in decisions concerning this development that is now common to us all, it becomes absolutely necessary to ensure that each of the languages in which they think, understand and imagine, continues to survive. It is impossible to conceive of the development of a globalized human race if it is not polyglot.

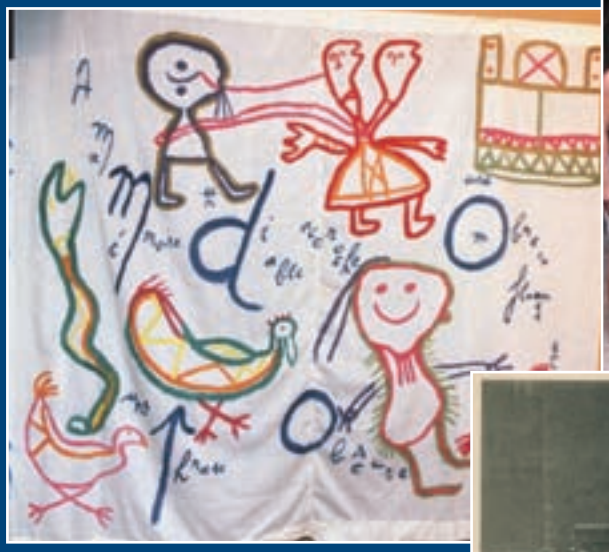
Every language is a precious treasure, because it is the path towards the life and vision of a human being, whose contribution to the common cause can only be authentic if it is expressed in the words of his or her own language. And, as we must all contribute to this common cause, the issue of translation between all these languages, and their perpetual interaction, becomes crucial for the justness of future development.

If there were only one language in the world, it would not be long before it started to diversify, because humans are themselves diverse and use their language creatively. The plurality of languages is proof of this. And, as such, it is a heritage that is truly common to all.

Françoise Rivière
Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO

Articles in this special edition are selections issued from 2008 -1, *Languages matter,* and 2009 - 2, *Endangered languages, endangered thought.*

LANGUAGE AND WORLD VIEWS



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Christopher Moseley, editor in chief of the UNESCO *"Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger"*, at the launch on 19 February at Paris headquarters.

EACH LANGUAGE IS A UNIQUE WORLD OF THOUGHT

Australian linguist Christopher Moseley explains the crucial importance of preserving languages and presents the main innovations of the *UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger.*

Interview by Lucía Iglesias Kuntz (UNESCO).

Why should we care about language preservation?

We as human beings should care about this in the same way we should care about the loss of the world's variety of plants and animals, its biodiversity. What is unique about present-day language revival movements, which didn't exist before, is that linguists are for the first time aware of just how many languages there are in the world, and are coming to a better understanding of the forces that are attacking them and exterminating them, and of ways to control those forces. It's very difficult and complex, and it would be naïve and oversimplifying to say that the big ex-colonial languages, English or French or Spanish, are the killers, and all smaller languages are the victims. It is not like that; there is a subtle interplay of forces, and this Atlas will help ordinary people to understand those forces better.

But to answer in one sentence: why do we have to care? Because each language is a uniquely struc-

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A "language nest" in which the Maori language is transmitted to children (New Zealand)..

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tured world of thought, with its own associations, metaphors, ways of thinking, vocabulary, sound system and grammar – all working together in a marvellous architectural structure, which is so fragile that it could easily be lost forever.

Can you tell us a few projects or initiatives you know that have helped to safeguard a language?

Projects and initiatives exist at all levels – from local grassroots campaigns from the bottom up to get people to read in their own language and thus pass it on to younger generations, up to big state–supported plans.

In Australia, for instance, there are active and successful campaigns to revive the use of languages that were regarded as dead for generations, but turned out to be only 'sleeping'. In New Zealand, the Maori language has been rescued from near oblivion through the scheme of 'language nests' – nurseries where the language is passed on to young children.

But the biggest success stories are the ones that are operated with state support and infrastructure, such as the reclaiming of Welsh in Wales or Catalan in Catalonia – two regions of Europe that have seen success in our own lifetimes – or, of course, the revival of Hebrew as a national language in Israel.

What is new in this edition of the Atlas?

This third edition of the Atlas is new in at least three important ways. Firstly and most obviously, it is being published in two different formats: an on-line version as well as a printed version. The on-line version is an important new development, and is based on Google Earth maps, with the location of each endangered language, no matter how small, pinpointed as exactly as possible on the maps, which can be filtered to any desired scale and level of detail.

Secondly, for the first time we are giving a comprehensive coverage of the whole world. The previous two editions gave only a sample from some continents of the state of threatened languages, but this time we have been careful to cover every language, and, as before, to show the level of endangerment, from "Unsafe" down to "Moribund" with a system of colour coding.

And thirdly, we are making the Atlas available in three languages: English, French and Spanish, with possibly more translations to come later.

You are the general editor of the Atlas. Can you explain how the work for this Atlas was done?

It was a worldwide collaborative effort by a team of linguists, all of them experts in the field of endangered languages and linguistics. As in the previous editions (published in 1996 and 2001), we had Regional Editors in charge of collecting data for each continent, writing the regional essays for the Atlas, and entering the language points in the maps.

For some areas, local knowledge of the situation came from specialists in several countries. Of course the contributors needed help and guidance from technical experts at the Section for Intangible Heritage of UNESCO as well. The Web Editor from UNESCO provided help and guidance for the editors at every step of the way while the on-line version was being created, because this was a pioneering experiment for all of us; and meanwhile the commissioning editors and myself as general editor were overseeing the preparation of the texts. The whole project has been done to a tight schedule, in just under a year from start to finish.

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Amazonia (Brazil): indigenous languages are today threatened with extinction, although Tupi, for one, was spoken as much as the official Portuguese until the mid-18th century.

THE MONKEYS, THE SCORPION AND THE SNAKE

Stone is petrified speech, water is language laughing, the sown seed, a promised word: every element of reality is an integral part of Toro Tegu, currently spoken by some 5000 Dogons in the north of Mali.

UNESCO/Yves Bergeret

According to tradition, the cobra is the guardian of the Toro Tegu language spoken in Dogon country, in Mali.

This is the twentieth time I have come to work with the Dogon painters of Koyo, high up on their table mountain in the north of Mali. In the black of night, we all stretch out on mats outside the mud house set aside for me, in the centre of the village. The farmer-painters and I are exhausted, but happy with the poem-paintings that we have just made on cloth, under the burning sun. The youngest of the painters is making tea. Our conversation turns to the ancestors.

Suddenly there is a sharp pain in my left hand. I grab my torch. A white scorpion has just stung me. I kill it. I panic at first and imagine that it will all be over for me in an hour. Then I think that I have thirty minutes of – relative – peace before the convulsions start. So I ask the head of the village if he has any traditional antidote to the venom. "No," he replies, "just wait. You will see." The conversation starts again. My hand then my arm feel as though they are on fire. But, two hours later, the pain has stopped. I fall into a deep sleep, with the head of the village staying to sleep beside me. A mystery.

Three days later, all eight of us – the six painters, the chief and myself – reach the foot of the cliff at the top of the mountain, ten kilometres from the village, where each monsoon storm turns into a massive waterfall. This place, where the water thunders, chants and sings almost all summer, is the source of many a legend. Caves protected by initiations bear ancient pictorial signs. But I know that they are also home to awesome cobras. I ask the painters if they have any medicine against their venom. "No. Sit down and we'll explain."

All of reality is speech

I will try to put together here what was passed on to me that morning, and so many times before, using the signs and symbols that the painters draw when, in our poem-paintings, we tell of the profound life of this place.

All of reality is speech; it is made and mellowed on the plateau at the top of the mountains. The beautiful round or flat stones are petrified, dense speech. Water is language laughing; the sky is its distant foreshadowing, the clouds its gestation and rain its joyful roar. The sown seed is a promised word: and, if the farmer sings, it increases its fertile strength. Here, the crops are farmed with the hoe and a song.

The language of my companions, after all, is called Toro Tegu, "word of the mountain" and is one of the fifteen Dogon languages, with about 5000 native speakers. The

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© UNESCO/Yves Bergeret

For Koyo villagers, the top of the mountain embodies the power of the word. Coming down the mountain, the word becomes weaker.

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Dogon from this ethnic group call themselves Toro Nomu, "people of the mountain".

The speciality of the Koyo village community, about 500 individuals, is to energize the fertility of the word through farming practices and rites. The community is broken down into small groups of six to eight individuals, who are linked forever and share at least one meal a day together. There is the group responsible for the collective grain stores, which are "reservoirs of the word", the group responsible for rainmaking rites, the group responsible for maintaining cliff paths, etc. Each group, of course, has its reference ancestor and only acts for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The dynamic harmony of reality is regularly recast through nocturnal singing and dancing by a specialized group of "women elders". The choreography includes a regular, wide, horizontal sweep with the right arm, which signifies sowing the word as if it were a seed.

The word at work

Since 2002, the painters, the head of the village and I – the poet of the written word – have formed a support group. We spread cloth or paper onto the flat rocks, like the fine loam of the market gardens, then I lay the "seeds" of the poem, while they lay the "seeds" of pictorial signs. These textiles and sheets of paper are then exhibited all over the world, bringing income, a "harvest" that feeds the village. We have been able to build a school, five reservoirs, which have doubled the area under cultivation, three "Painters' Houses" which can be visited, etc., as part of a development project for the village [see 'Koyo, a place for dialogue between two cultures', UNESCO Courier , n° 4, 2008].

Our group has two reference ancestors, because it soon spawned other groups, responsible for maintaining the school, the "Painters' Houses" and other fruits of our development project. "We have decided that you have become Dogon," the painters tell me, "and you must add the names of these two ancestors to yours. The last time a foreigner was allowed to join us was five centuries ago. He is the one who painted the symbols in one of the caves near to the great waterfall. He is one of our two reference ancestors. But now he is the last but one foreigner to be accepted, because you are the last."

According to Toro Nomu, everything on the mountaintop is the word at work and in harmony with itself. Animals are also elements of this. But, in contrast, everything that is beneath these high plateaux – like a ravine, a gorge or even a 42 kilometre-wide plain, separating the two plateaux – bears the generic name of pondo: here the word is weak, shapeless, undulating, shifting. Above all, it is the word of the nomadic herders, who have held feudal rule over the plain for centuries

"Our hordes of monkeys shake the word into confusion", the painters continue, "but the scorpions and cobras are creatures that the word uses to protect itself. If they come across a stranger, they kill him. But they never attack us".

"Ah, that is why the scorpion stung me the other evening!"

"No, no, you still haven't understood. Make an effort! You speak Toro Tegu. You have become Dogon. The scorpion made a mistake when he stung you. Who is dead, him or you?"

Yves Bergeret,
French poet

© UNESCO/Yves Bergeret

The "Painters' House" in the Dogon village of Boni. At right, the snake motif.

After prolific production in French, the Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop decided to write in Wolof. For a poor, multilingual population with an oral tradition, books are not a priority. Yet African writers who express themselves in their national languages are becoming more and more numerous. Interview.

PREACHING IN THE WILDERNESS OR BANKING ON THE FUTURE?

Interview by Jasmina Šopova.

© UNESCO/Gargi Shinde

Boubacar Boris Diop.

You wrote a dozen books in French before choosing Wolof, your mother language. Why this reversion?

Actually, my language was always there, inside me. The only problem I faced was the ability to write in my language. I was "corrupted" by French. I spoke everyday Wolof, but I didn't possess it intimately.

Then there was Rwanda. A group of writers I belonged to went there after the genocide, in 1998, as part of the operation "Rwanda: writing as a duty to memory". I said to myself that if we'd let 10,000 Rwandans get killed per day for three months, if nobody had done anything, this conveyed a certain contempt for Africa…

At that moment I felt even more strongly the desire to write in my mother language. It became essential. Oh, at first it was painful…I was very afraid of writing a French novel in Wolof. I had to fight against myself, but the Diops are stubborn! Then I began to hear voices – voices that came up out of the past. And writing became very easy. I am certain that my first novel in Wolof, Doomi Golo *(The She-Monkey's Young),* is my best piece of writing.

Is writing in Wolof therefore also a political act?

Absolutely. Coming back to the title of my novel *The She-Monkey's Young*: what's a monkey? It's an imitation of the other. The passage that best sums up the book is the one in which you see a huge mirror in the middle of nowhere. Two gorillas find themselves in front of the mirror and they see their own images. They start fighting their reflections and as a result of hitting the mirror, they hurt themselves and die. What we call hatred of the other is in fact self-hatred. You have to be able to tolerate your image in the mirror, assume your identity.

At the moment I'm translating this novel into French. It will be published in France in September 2008.

Why didn't you decide to publish it in French in Senegal?

Because now there are only publishers in national languages. That's good news, anyway… even if their tongues are hanging out! They work with enthusiasm, but with immeasurable difficulties too: no way to make a profit, no distribution… True, the state occasionally steps in. The "Direction du Livre et de la Lecture" (book and reading administration) funded, for instance, a second edition of my book Doomi Golo after the first run of 3000 copies was sold out.

Besides my publisher Papyrus, there's the Organisation Sénégalaise d'Appui au Développement (OSAD) that does remarkable work. And also ARED publishers, but they're specialized in research and in education for development.

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In 2006, UNESCO took part in the 50th Anniversary of the 1st International Congress of Black Writers and Artists. Group photo of the participants in 1956.

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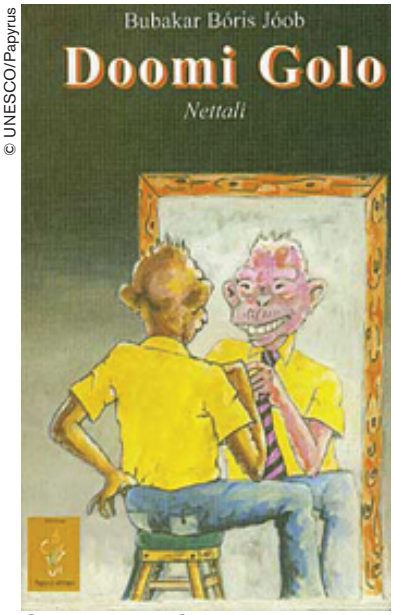

Cover of Doomi Golo, book by B.B. Diop in Wolof, at Papyrus (Senegal).

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How many readers can you have in Wolof?

If I'd asked myself that question, I would never have started writing! It's true that where I come from, many people don't know how to read and don't buy books. And they have other priorities: their children's health, feeding their families… There's also another phenomenon: rich people who live in poor societies generally prefer buying a fancy car, because you can't show off a book…

We have to accept this situation and bet on the long term. It will take a while for books written today in the African languages to prevail, but they'll eventually find acceptance. Thirty years ago, literature in national languages didn't exist, except for a few isolated cases. Today the situation is the opposite: hundreds of books have been published in Wolof and Pulaar, definitely more than in French.

There are two writers' organizations in Senegal, one composed of writers in French, the other of writers in national languages. The latter are far more numerous, but they have no visibility, because we live in a society where French is the language of prestige.

Do you count on diaspora readership?

A great deal. But although the younger generations of the diaspora speak their mother languages, they don't know how to read or write them. This is why I had the idea of organizing a Wolof workshop with young people whose background is Senegalese immigration in France. At first the parents didn't necessarily see any benefit in their children learning their mother language, but there was great demand from the young people. We're starting in Bordeaux on 25 February. It's an idea that seems odd initially, but if it works I'll be very proud of it.

Often when one travels from one African capital to another, one has to stop off in a European capital. Does this also happen in the world of African literature?

It would be fantastic if I could translate the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo directly form Kikuyu into Wolof, without going through English and French… To my knowledge there's almost no translation from one African language into another. My novel Doomi Golo is translated into Pulaar now. But who will translate it into Swahili? Do we have to wait two or three centuries? Not necessarily, but that's what I fear, alas.

You know, Africa was divided up by the colonial powers in Berlin in 1885. Africans speak to each other through the colonial languages. And me, making fun of it, referring to the Berlin Wall of the Cold War, I call it our "Berlin Wall". It is invisible but terrible – it separates the English-, French- and Portuguese-speaking countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

With Moussa Konaté, Malian writer who heads the French-speaking festival "Etonnants voyageurs" (Amazing Travelers) in Mali, I've often discussed the idea of organizing a big meeting of African writers who write in national languages. A way of at least making cracks in this wall. But it's easier to find sponsors for French-language writers than for those who write in national languages. UNESCO could be the perfect venue for such a pan-African encounter, particularly this year, International Year of Languages (2008). And it's an international space. Without walls.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

© UNESCO

Detail of poster for International Mother Language Day.

AN EPIDEMIC IS THREATENING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Some languages are spoken by very few people but are still very much alive, while others have been preserved by the isolation of their speakers. Marleen Haboud from Ecuador explains these apparently paradoxical phenomena.

Marleen Haboud, a specialist in Andean languages, talks to Lucía Iglesias Kuntz (UNESCO).

What is the status of Central Andean languages, in terms of their viability?

In the Central Andes (Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia) the estimate is that one hundred indigenous languages are still alive. Determining exactly just how alive they are is not easy. This varies not only from one language to another, but also within a given language, depending on where it is spoken, the age of the speaker, their vocation, gender, level of education, etc.

For example, in Ecuador, Quechua is widely spoken in certain regions of the country, while it is rapidly disappearing from others. In this heterogeneous context, and even if certain languages continue to be used by the new generations, the general trend for all languages in the region is constant regression.

How do you explain this situation?

Several factors are involved, such as the living conditions of native speakers, whether or not they receive institutional and social aid, the extent to which the language continues to function in all modern communication contexts, and indeed, the interest and pride of the people who speak it.

In terms of viability, the number of native speakers can be a relative concept. Some languages are spoken by a small number of people but are very much alive, such as A'i cofán in Ecuadorian Amazonia. And, on the contrary, the number of speakers of some trans-national languages, such as Quechua, is dwindling every day.

Some indigenous languages maintain their vitality because of the isolation of native speakers, who find they have around them all they need to live comfortably. But isolation should not be a condition for the survival of one of these languages; the ideal situation would be that they cohabit with the predominant languages and societies and that they gain in strength, despite the homogenizing trends of globalization.

Why do languages disappear?

Over the last decades, a complex set of circumstances has accelerated the disappearance of indig-

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enous languages, including contacts with other peoples, the death of native speakers, radical changes in their way of life, loss of land, massive migrations, and so on.

Only joint actions integrated with global society can curb this kind of epidemic, which is making indigenous languages and their speakers vulnerable. This presupposes that, first of all, society as a whole gets to know these languages and their speakers, and learns to respect and help keep them alive, so that we achieve the ideal of a truly multicultural society.

Another very important factor for keeping a language alive is the image that both its speakers and non-speakers have of it. A person who is proud of his or her language will be more likely to keep it going.

© Marleen Haboud

Marleen Haboud from Ecuador is an Andean language specialist.

Could you give examples of some national or regional initiatives that have helped to revitalize languages in the region?

There have been several initiatives in our countries to help maintain minority languages. On one hand there have been government initiatives. In Andean countries, constitutional reforms have given indigenous languages an official status. The linguistic and educational policies of these countries are quite well defined and, even if they are still not always widely applied, their aim is to preserve the languages, culture and identity of their speakers, as well as respect and equality between peoples.

At the same time there are the efforts being made by speakers themselves, both collectively and individually. For example, thanks to the creation of specific family- and community-based educational programmes, families are trying to regain or consolidate their languages. Indigenous movements in Latin America have turned a corner in their campaign for the rights of indigenous peoples, with the creation of new bilingual, intercultural educational programmes at all levels of formal education, specific health programmes and the creation of official services for speakers of certain languages.

In some countries more than others, the media have also taken initiatives to encourage the public use of certain languages, especially those with the greatest number of speakers. Bolivia is a prime example of this.

Throughout history, new languages have been born while others have died out, why should we be concerned about the disappearance of languages?

Just like humans themselves, languages are born and die, but we have never before seen them die at such a rapid rate as during the past decades. This means not just the loss of words and expressions, but also a store of knowledge and ways of understanding the world and communicating with others, of constructing history, of exchanging with other human beings, with elders and younger generations, and of conceptualising time, space, the living world, life and death. Each language is a universe. And, every time a word dies, unique and irreplaceable stories disappear with it.

© Marleen Haboud

For a language to survive it must be passed on to the next generation.

© Flickr

The Kallawaya's cosmovision was proclaimed a masterpiece of the oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO in 2003.

THE SECRETS OF MACHAJ JUYAI-KALLAWAYA

Developed down through the centuries, Machaj Juyai is a "secret language" still spoken by a few families of traditional herbalist healers, the Kallawaya, who live in the Bolivian Andes. They propagate a now-threatened ancestral knowledge, which UNESCO is working to safeguard.

The Kallawaya, itinerant herbalist healers from Bautista Saavedra province in the state of La Paz, have developed down through the centuries a "family language" in their kinship groups (ayllu), within which they have transmitted their holistic medicinal know-how from generation to generation. They named it Machaj Juyai, the "folk language", still spoken today by the eight ayllus of the Kallawaya in a province where the language of social relations and daily life is Quechua.

Already colonial administrators were curious about this language and writers of Hispanic and mixed origin testified to its "rareness". As early as the 17th century, information circulated regarding the existence of a specialized language of herbalist healers who spent their time concocting remedies for Inca kings and their entourage.

The Kallawaya and the Eiffel Tower

Scientists in the 19th century, however, would not recognize the Kallawaya as having their own language, and questioned them on their knowledge of herbal medicines in the dominant language of the high plateaus, Aymara. The Kallawaya speak it, in order to communicate with a larger number of patients and to enlarge their sphere of activity.

With the aim of publishing a list of medicinal plants with industrial properties and present it at the 1889 Universal Exposition, the one for which the Eiffel Tower was built, Bolivian scientists and civil servants asked the Kallawaya to describe in Aymara the properties of more than 100 plants brought to France for this great "celebration of civilization". This was the moment the idea spread that the Kallawaya were Aymara.

© Ministerio de Cultura, Bolivia

Kallawaya ritual.

Another half-century had to elapse before the Kallawaya were accepted as a specific group with its own language and forms of expression. The Machaj Juyai-Kallawaya language was heard by scientists in ceremonial and healing contexts, and it was also proven that it was used to a great extent as a language of communication within the group.

There was thus, mid-20th century, renewed interest in the Kallawaya's language as an expression of their know-how. According to some, Machaj Juyai-Kallawaya was the secret language of the Inca kings and those closest to them. Other experts attempted in vain to find parallels between Machaj Juyai and the ancient Puquina language, or the Uru from the Andean high plateaus. Others imagined a possible link to languages of the Amazonian forest, where the Kallawaya traveled to seek out the herbal, animal and mineral resources they used to prevent and cure illness. The Kalawaya's role as intermediaries

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© Flickr

Witch market where the Kallawaya get their supplies. (La Paz, Bolivia).

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between the Incas and the Amazonian populations may have influenced their language.

Chronicle of a death foretold

Obviously the Kallawaya's language was subjected to the influence of Quechua, which was the instrument of their forced conversion to Catholicism. The Kallawaya elite were persecuted in the 17th century in the battle led by the Catholic Church known as "extirpation of idolatry". Children were separated from grown-ups, to be brought up by Spanish people or Quechua Catholic priests. Quechua exerted further influence on the Kallawaya in the 19th century, when the latter emigrated massively to Peru, where they found numerous clients and even became in the early 20th century the official doctors of President Augusto Bernardino Leguía. On their own territory too, the Kallawaya felt the demographic pressure of neighboring ayllus, who spoke Quechua. This is why today Machaj Juyai-Kallawaya has absorbed nearly all the phonology and grammar of Quechua.

More recently, Machaj Juyai-Kallawaya's vitality was sorely tested during two historical events. The first was the Chaco War (1932-1935) between Bolivia and Paraguay. The Kallawaya were mobilized as aides to the doctors responsible for giving care to the enormous contingent of indigenous Bolivians, comprised of Aymara and Quechuas. Kallawaya lost their lives in great number, which would have serious repercussions on subsequent demographic development.

The second event was the 1952 revolution led by the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM), which led to structural social change: the right to vote was extended universally, the biggest national mining companies were nationalized and agricultural lands were redistributed. The Kallawaya's traditional nomadic way of life gave way to settlement in cities, where they became herbalists or jewelers.

The idea of sending young Kallawaya to medical school, sparing them criminal prosecution for practicing indigenous medicine outlawed by Bolivian law, came out of this urban environment. This has created space for the struggle to decriminalize indigenous medicine in Bolivia. The Kallawaya are becoming professionals within the framework of Western university knowledge, but they are doing so at the cost of a crucial cultural dimension: the Machaj Juyai-Kallawaya language. These days a large majority of Kallawaya is trilingual – Castilian, Aymara and Quechua – but few of them are fluent in their original language.

During the 2001 census conducted by the Bolivian state, the existence of the Kallawaya ethnic group and its language was not recognized. Nor is UNESCO's proclamation of the Cosmovision of the Kallawaya as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity legally recognized. At present, the Kallawaya are taking steps in order to obtain legal recognition from the Bolivian Parliament for themselves and their language. The new Constitution (currently in the making) could prove them right.

By Carmen Beatriz Loza,
researcher at the Bolivian institute of traditional Kallawaya medicine
(El Alto, La Paz, Bolivia)

THE SAGA OF THE AINU LANGUAGE

Several thousand years old, the Ainu language spoken in northern Japan was dying out due to political pressure from the central government. At the end of the 20th century, this trend was reversed. While Ainu's future is still not guaranteed because it isn't taught in schools, the resurgence of interest is undeniable.

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In the past, the Ainu occupied the northen part of the Japanese archipelago.

A true linguistic enigma, Ainu (Ainu Itak) can't be linked with certainty to any family of languages. Yet, as numerous specialists agree that the Ainu people are descendants of populations from the Jomon era (11,000 to 6,000 B.C.) that inhabited the Japanese archipelago, it is very probable their language finds its origins in Neolithic languages.

According to historical sources, the Ainu people first settled the northern part of the Japanese archipelago. The inhabitants of the Tohoku region (in the north of Honshu, the largest Japanese island) gradually had to abandon their language and culture starting in the 14th century, due to pressure from the central government. But further north, in Hokkaido, as well as in the southern part of Sakhalin Island (the north belonging to Russia) and in the more isolated Kuril Islands, they were able to preserve them until the islands were annexed by the new Meiji government in 1869.

Not long after, following the signing of the 1875 "Treaty for the Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kuril Islands" between Japan and Russia, most of the Ainu from southern Sakhalin were displaced to Hokkaido. Epidemics decimated the population. The same fate befell the Kuril Islands Ainu, who died out entirely after being forcibly regrouped, for national security reasons, on an island off the coast of Hokkaido. Japanese authorities feared that these Ainu, some of them converts to Orthodox Christianity, would serve as spies for the Russians established in the Kurils.

At the end of the Russian-Japanese war, as of 1906, a good number of the Ainu from Sakhalin returned, because Japan controlled the south of the island. But on Stalin's orders all were expelled in 1945 and they settled in Hokkaido. Sakhalin's tradition and dialect disappeared as the expatriates died – generally, they hadn't transmitted their knowledge to the next generation.

Beginning in 1868, the Japanese government imposed a new way of life on the Hokkaido Ainu. A series of prohibitions concerning hunting and fishing, for instance, traditional Ainu resources, profoundly undermined their culture. The community was stigmatized, considered savage and inferior. Officially, the new Hokkaido authorities never intended to eradicate the Ainu language. But they did everything to that end, notably by building schools specifically for the "natives" in which they were taught Japanese. In order to survive in this new Hokkaido society, irrigated by continual waves of Japanese immigrants, the Ainu gradually gave up their customs and their language. Today, for new generations, Ainu is a second language, if they even speak it.

The last Ainu is not dead

The exact number of Ainu speakers is unknown. Only surveys conducted every seven years since 1972 by the Hokkaido government, concerning living conditions among uteri (compatriot, in Ainu) people, allow an approximate assessment of the Ainu language situation. The 2006 poll shows that out of 23,782

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The exact number of Ainu speakers is unknown.

© Flickr/Jens Mattow

Post card representing a group of Ainus, around 1990.

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Ainu, 304 know the language, and among these 4.6% feel they master it to the point of being able to teach it. But we mustn't forget these answers are subjective and don't necessarily correspond to reality. Furthermore, much of the population doesn't participate in polls and hides its identity.

This said, assertions that the Ainu language is becoming extinct must be understood in relative terms. Since the 1990s, whenever an Ainu dies, the media announce the death of the last Ainu speaker, forgetting that more and more Ainu are starting to relearn their language, inspired by elders or linguists.

To replace the 1899 law supporting assimilation policies, the Ainu demanded the promulgation of a new law in the 1980s. The law for the protection and promotion of Ainu culture was finally promulgated in 1997, facilitating, for instance, language instruction.

A law can change everything

Founded in 1946, Hokkaido's Ainu association, the largest in Japan, gives free language courses in 14 regions in Hokkaido, to both Ainu and Japanese students. No statistics on attendance are available, however. The foundation for research and promotion of Ainu culture, created by the 1997 law, has a section for training Ainu language teachers; it accepts seven students a year.

The publication of dictionaries, textbooks and bilingual Ainu-Japanese collections of Ainu oral literature is increasing year by year. A private radio station in Sapporo has been broadcasting a weekly Ainu language class program over Hokkaido territory since the 1980s. In April 2001, Shigeru Kayano, activist for Ainu identity and first Japanese parliament member from this community (1926-2006), financed the creation of a radio station, FM Pipaushi that airs a show in Ainu locally in central Hokkaido two Sundays a month.

It must be recognized, however, that for now the Ainu interested in their language are from relatively affluent backgrounds. The Ainu are for the most part marginalized and have little time to devote to learning their language. Despite the upsurge of interest, as long as Ainu is not part of the curriculum in Hokkaido schools, its future is uncertain. This language is part of Japanese intangible heritage and is entitled to government protection, notably through its official recognition as a second national language.

By Kaori Tahara,
historian of Ainu origin,
graduate of the École des Hautes Études
en Sciences Sociales, Paris

LANGUAGES AND SOCIAL COHESION

LANGUAGES AND IMMIGRATION: BILINGUALISM IS AN ASSET

To deprive immigrant children of their mother tongues is to create situations of conflict between the family model and the social model, which is to scorn their identities. If their languages and cultures were respected by school systems, they would develop a better esteem of themselves and of others.

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Welcome to the Island of Gorée, Senegal.

A large number of "developed" states have official languages, but their populations of various ethnic origins speak a number of other languages every day. "It has been estimated that in the year 2000 more than one third of the population under the age of 35 in urbanized Western Europe had an immigrant minority background", said a UNESCO document about language diversity (see link), which notes that that "the biggest immigrant groups in the European Union are Turkish and North African and live in France, Germany and Britain".

Politicians in western countries are today drafting laws to tighten immigration conditions and are introducing language and culture tests. To ask applicants for immigration to know the rudiments of French, Dutch or English, as well as the basic rules of how the host countries work, does not seem absurd.

But when they arrive, there is often an attempt to "erase" their mother tongues from their heads, especially if these are considered as "minor" languages. We only need to remember the October 2004 report about internal security in France (see link to Report about the prevention of delinquency). "[For children from 1 to 3 years old], only parents, and especially mothers, have contact with their children. If the children are of foreign origin, the parents should force themselves to speak French at home, in order to get the children used to having only this language to express themselves in", says the report, noting: "But if, in certain cases, they feel the reluctance of their fathers, who often insist on the use of the dialect of their countries of origin at home, they will be dissuaded from doing so. It will then be necessary to take action to encourage fathers to go in the right direction".

In the original French passage the word "français" (French), designating a language, was written in capitals, which is contrary to the rules of French spelling. It may be supposed that "speaking a dialect" is understood as speaking Arabic, Chinese, Serbian, etc.

According to this report, the cognitive, educational and social development of children that are not forced to speak French at home would be compromised, as they would inevitably have language disorders, leading to behavioural disorders, later resulting in delinquency!

The mother tongues of immigrants under accusation

This absurd position reflects a flagrant ignorance of language development and of the role of the mother tongue in the psychic, cognitive and cultural construction of an individual. How for a moment could one imagine that a mother might speak a language that she did not master well to her child? How could one be ignorant of the fact that the mother tongue conveys affects, that it enables the organization of cognitive faculties, that it symbolizes – for children of immigrant background – the continuity between the country

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of origin and the family.

To deprive the child of the mother tongue at home is to create a situation of conflict between the family model and the social model and between family and school, with the further risk of impoverishing cultural references and weakening socialization.

This also implies that bilingualism is not considered as an asset but as a handicap, as an obstacle to successful education and integration, above all when the languages concerned, such as Arabic, Chinese or Russian, are, ridiculously, called "rare". When the languages concerned, such as English or German, are 'socially valorized' languages, bilingualism becomes a symbol of the elite!

The arguments and proposals for the use (or rather non-use) of the mother tongue in the 2004 Report about the prevention of delinquency have many supporters in political and academic circles in France, but the report gave rise to violent reactions: associations, NGOs, trade unions and intellectuals were mobilized, and the wording of the report was modified. In the 2005 version, the following can be found: "Recognition of early bilingualism as a factor of integration. After many debates, the commission has considerably changed its position on the subject. It also seems that maintaining both the mother tongue and the dominant language enables children to have better results at school (...)"

Conflict or dialogue of languages?

The last twenty years of research into psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics has unequivocally shown that the acquisition and learning of several languages by children, no matter what their socio-cultural background may be and no matter which languages may be concerned, does not hinder the cognitive and educational development of these children in the slightest. On the contrary, bilingual children show a greater speed and flexibility in certain learning situations, and develop better communication skills. If they are slightly deficient in the second language, this is often temporary, and they compensate for this by a richer mental system, cognitive skills that are often more efficient and a richer vision of the world.

When educational difficulties affect children of immigrants, most teachers in France place the blame mainly on the conflict of languages and cultures. However, if the languages and cultures of immigrants were emphasized more, taught to all pupils in schools and respected by the school system and by the dominant society, individuals would develop a better esteem and respect of themselves and therefore of others.

François Cheng, a Chinese author, who arrived in Paris at the age of 20 without knowing a word of French, and who has been a member of the Académie Française since 2003, wrote in his book Le Dialogue (2002): "fate made that from a certain time in my life, I became the bearer of two languages, Chinese and French. Was it only because of fate? Unless, all the same, there was a part of deliberate free will in it? The fact remains that I tried to take up the challenge, by coming to terms with the two languages in my own way, with the most extreme consequences. […] It is not surprising that since then, in the heart of my linguistic adventure, which is directed towards the love for an

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To deprive the child of the mother tongue at home is to create a situation of conflict between the family model and the social model.

> ***Like a sleepwalker, along the paths taken by smugglers, I was passing from my childhood language to the language of my chosen country.***
>
> ***Hector Bianciotti,***
> French writer
> of Argentinian origin

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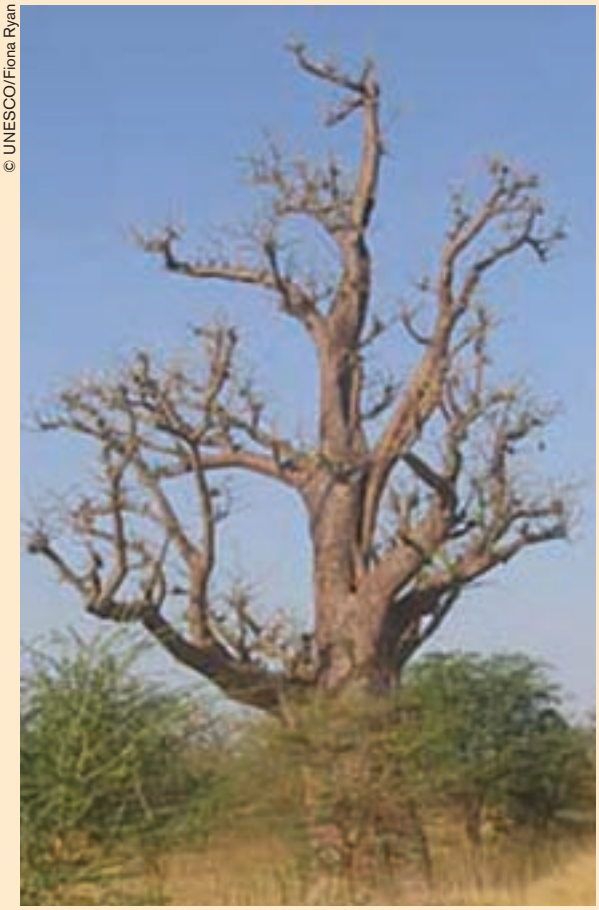
adopted language, one theme has had pride of place: dialogue…"

Dialogue between communities, dialogue between languages - linguists know and emphasize the fact that immigrants contribute to the dynamism and enrichment of languages such as English or French. As an example, the mixing of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese with English is a worldwide phenomenon, which immigrants of various Asian origins use to communicate with each other, therefore making their own linguistic contributions. It is the same for "Spanglish", a hybrid language that mixes English and Spanish, which is very popular with young people in the United States, and is one of the most striking examples of changes in a language faced with immigration and globalisation.

Ranka Bijeljac-Babić,
Franco-Serb psycholinguist, Université de Poitiers et Paris 5 - CNRS.

BABYLON RECONQUERED

A brutal separation from one's linguistic and cultural context evokes in my mind the image of a tree cut down one fine day to be planted in different earth. The tree that until that day had run its roots in its own soil and stood firm and solid on its roots found itself suddenly uprooted, and made an effort to put down its roots again in other soil and to remain standing.



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The image of this tree in its earth and in this different earth inflames my heart and I think of the tree's distress and solitude, and I know very well those who at some point in their lives were forced to leave their linguistic and cultural territory, to establish themselves in another linguistic and cultural territory, know very well this distress and solitude. They fully conceive the wrath of God and they live the story of Babylon and its tower.

The story of those people who wanted to be God and devoted themselves to building a tower. From day to day the tower took shape and gained in height, it approached the sky and these people became God… So God became angry and took away the unity of their language. No one could understand the other's language. The tower remained unfinished and the desire to become God even more so. Every language became a wall and people found themselves alone and powerless. Behind the wall, they isolated themselves and the desire to become God left them.

Possibly it was these same cries of solitude, this absence of anyone to speak to intelligibly, that took form and gave birth to poetry and literature… and each language became a treasure of unconfined unlimited riches.

While God took linguistic unity away from humans, they on the other hand created the diversity of translation. Every translation opens a door in the wall, a door that gives onto another language, another culture, another existence and another wealth, so that every reader of another language may go through these doors, forget Babylon and divine wrath; so that another language may become their language, another culture their culture, another existence their existence and another wealth their wealth.

Spôjmaï Zariab,
Afghan novelist

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All languages are good enough for advertising!

THE INDIAN DILEMMA

With some 1,650 languages and more than a million schools including all levels, India faces a serious challenge: to ensure national cohesion without compromising the interests of regional languages. It has invented the "three language formula", difficult to implement.

The Indian tower of Babel takes the shape of a pyramid, with Hindu and English at the top, both of which remain foreign languages for two-thirds of the population. Then come the official languages of the States and Territories (regional languages), followed by minority languages, spoken by more than a million people, but with no administrative function. Hundreds of others are located at the foot of this imposing linguistic edifice, under the aegis of a linguistic minority commissioner whose mandate is advisory and not legally binding.

In all: 1,650 languages, with 400 used as languages of communication. Among the latter, 22 are spoken by 75% of Indians and are listed in the Indian constitution. It guarantees the protection of languages that are not listed, but only 60 of those are taught in schools, 11 of them registered as minority or tribal.

An odd fact: Hindi, the official Indian union language along with English, is spoken by only 40% of the Indian population and is therefore a minority language. The issue of minorities is extremely complex, insofar as language is an element closely related to ethnic and religious identity. Muslims, for instance, speak Urdu, Sikhs Panjabi, and Anglo-Indians English. While their languages are recognized by the constitution, more than 600 tribal minorities from the mountains speak languages that are not taught in schools.

The trilingual formula

The sub-continent counts more than one billion inhabitants, 35% of them under 15 years of age. The Indian government has the onerous task of managing an education system that dates back about 150 years and today comprises 664,041 primary schools, 219,626 upper primary schools, 133,492 secondary schools, 297 universities, 8,737 university-level general education colleges and 2,409 professional institutes.

Since its independence in 1947, the country has been putting into effect educational policies aimed at mass literacy and economic development – key factors to unite a people split into a multitude of religions, languages, castes and cultures.

Beginning in 1952, the Indian government's secondary education commission put forward the outline of a multilingual educational policy including the mother language, the regional (or State) language, Hindi as the language of general communication and one of the classical languages (Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic or Persian).

Revised in 1961, the proposal was named "three language formula" (TLF) including the regional language, Hindi in non-Hindi-speaking areas or another Indian language in

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© UNESCO/Roger Dominique

Secondary school in New-Delhi.

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Hindi-speaking areas, plus English or another European language.

Finally, between 1964 and 1966, the Education Commission proposed a modified version of TLF: the mother language or regional language; an official language, Hindi or English; and another modern language, Indian or foreign.

Over the 12 years of primary and secondary school, instruction is given in the mother or regional language from the first to the fifth year, and TLF is introduced in the sixth year.

No magic formula

Recognized as the national norm, TLF is nonetheless not applied to the letter in all states. It is more hypothetical project than social reality. Although priority is given to the mother language at least at the start of formal education, if not throughout schooling, it is not obligatory. Certain states, such as Tamil Nadu, have opted for two instead of three languages; in others, instead of learning a modern language, a classic language is substituted, like Sanskrit or Arabic. In some schools French or German is taught instead of Hindi.

Failure of state policy? Or instead, as we would say, a dynamic and flexible linguistic policy in education, which seeks to reconcile tradition and modernity on one hand and institutional and civic responsibilities on the other.

Because it must be understood that although tribal/minority languages are closely linked to cultural, religious and ethnic identity, at the same time they are "useless" in contemporary life. Minority communities are torn between two trends: some demand their rights and struggle to obtain an official status for their language, while others choose assimilation with the majority instead.

In order to protect minority languages and safeguard the thousand-year-old heritage they contain, there is talk of turning the three language formula into a four language one. Nothing is yet certain.

The state may well guarantee schooling in a minority language whenever a class contains 10 pupils who speak it as their mother language, but the fact is most parents would prefer their children to learn English or be educated in English. The "unconstitutional" languages have no "market value" and social upward mobility often comes before socio-cultural identity.

Appasamy Murugaiyan,
Indian linguist, teaches at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris

KYRGYZ: AN "EMERGING" LANGUAGE

© Kyrgyz National Commission for UNESCO

The art of the Akyn was proclaimed by a masterpiece of the oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO in 2003.

In the streets of Bishkek, two languages are found side by side on advertising billboards, at newsstands and in conversations. After gaining its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan adopted Kyrgyz as its national language and kept Russian as the official language. Linguistic results are mixed.

Out of the 15 former Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan is the only one – along with Kazakhstan – to keep Russian as its official language in addition to its national language, Kyrgyz. Yet the latter, a member of the Turkic group of languages, is spoken by 73% of the population (amounting to 3.7 million people). At the same time, in the capital Bishkek, center of Kyrgyzstan's public and cultural life, Russian remains present if not dominant.

The generations educated in Russian at the time of the Soviet Union, notably in urban areas, speak Kyrgyz without mastering it entirely. Often it's a language they learned in school. "If tomorrow the government decided to switch to Kyrgyz, I'd never make it in my professional life," says Jyldyz Asanbayeva, program assistant at the Public Policy Institute. She's among the 2 to 3% ethnic Kyrgyz who don't consider Kyrgyz their mother language.

The language has a long oral tradition, with its famous epic bards called akyns, but the alphabet of today, starting with Latin characters and then changing to Cyrillic, dates back only to the 1920s. And for the duration of the Soviet period, its use was limited to rural areas (within families and between friends) or in certain circles of the intelligentsia (concerned about the preservation of the language), even if Kyrgyz is used for teaching in most schools and is studied at the highest level in Moscow and Leningrad (now St Petersburg).

Russian: back and forth

Shortly before independence, with the impetus of perestroika, local authorities imposed Kyrgyz as the national language, by passing the 1989 law on the national language of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kyrgyz. But political will is one thing, reality another. Due to insufficient means, the law was not applied; very quickly, funds were reduced and the civil servants in charge dismissed.

Interest in the language fluctuated according to the numerous changes in government in the country, where the political situation was in frequent upheaval. Different decrees came one after another in support of Kyrgyz, but this protectionist linguistic policy only exacerbated tensions in the country, which is home to 80 different ethnic groups who use Russian to communicate among themselves. Concerned to see Russian-speaking people leaving the country in droves, deputies in 2000 voted a new law on the official language: Russian and Kyrgyz from then on had equal status, the first as official language and the second as national language.

Good news for Russian speakers in Kyrgyzstan, who in 16 years of independence had not felt the need to learn Kyrgyz, for lack of a coherent linguistic policy.

Authorities wanted to "create a necessity" to speak Kyrgyz, but didn't allocate the resources. "Our Institute doesn't have the funds to publish our scientists' research. The manuscript for the Great Russian-Kyrgyz dictionary, which has 250 pages, is sitting in a cupboard covered in dust," laments Kadyraly Konkobayev, director of the Linguistic Institute of Kyrgyzstan's Academy of Sciences. While during the Soviet

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era more than 30 fundamental texts on the Kyrgyz language were published, almost none have been produced since the country's independence.

Konkobayev sounds another alert: "The literary and artistic situation is dire. In the literature department, we don't have enough authors to study in the area of Kyrgyz national literature and, I have to say, many of our contemporary writers are practically illiterate." It isn't only the authors, he adds; one only has to look at the poor quality of the newspapers.

"The work accomplished since independence regarding the development of the language is unsatisfactory," explains Tachboo Djumagulov, president of the Commission for the Development of the National Language. But since the March 2005 revolution (which ousted President Aska Akayev) efforts are increasing: "Before 2005 state subsidies amounted to US$ 35,000; now they're US$ 170,000."

Even if that's nothing compared to the US$ 30 million spent in neighboring Kazakhstan to promote Kazakh, results are tangible. Television is the best example: before 2005, there was only one Kyrgyz-language channel; now five out of ten devote 60% of air time to programs in Kyrgyz.

> ***"The Art of Akyns, this ancient form of cultural expression of the nomadic Kyrgyz people, the great Kyrgyz epics, represent a veritable oral encyclopedia of Kyrgyz social values, cultural knowledge and collective memory. The Akyns' art of storytelling, which combines spirited singing, improvisation and musical composition, is performed at religious and private festivities, seasonal ceremonies and national holidays. I enjoyed watching it in Issyk-Kul on the occasion of Mr Chingiz Aitmatov's 75th birthday celebration."***
>
> Koïchiro Matsuura,
> Director-General of UNESCO,
> 11 June 2004.

Education: the weak link

Education seems to be the main element missing from the national language battle. "On one hand the number of hours of Kyrgyz instruction is increasing in schools and universities, but on the other hand there are very few qualified teachers," explains Konkobayev. Indeed, all universities have established a new post: vice-rector for the Kyrgyz language, responsible for promoting it and encouraging professors to give courses in it (including within Russian-language universities).

Thanks to the Commission's efforts to develop the national language, new teaching methodologies for Kyrgyz have been developed. They replace the old ones, often very cumbersome and ineffective, and introduce short dialogues, games and concrete examples. With 3,000 copies of the course in circulation, it is nonetheless difficult to meet the needs of the more than 2,100 schools (1,700 of them entirely Kyrgyz) and the 40-odd universities across the country, some of which give Kyrgyz classes. Besides, the state funds the publication of textbooks for schools, but not for universities. Result: university textbooks simply don't exist.

The mixed linguistic results in Kyrgyzstan bring up questions about the methods employed. Is it really useful to impose a language without developing the educational infrastructure? Measures taken to preserve the Kyrgyz language must be entirely revised, in the context of globalization, which here too is knocking at the door with English and becoming more and more of a threat.

Katerina Markelova,
journalist for *the UNESCO Courier*

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Russian and Kyrgyz newspaper stand in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.

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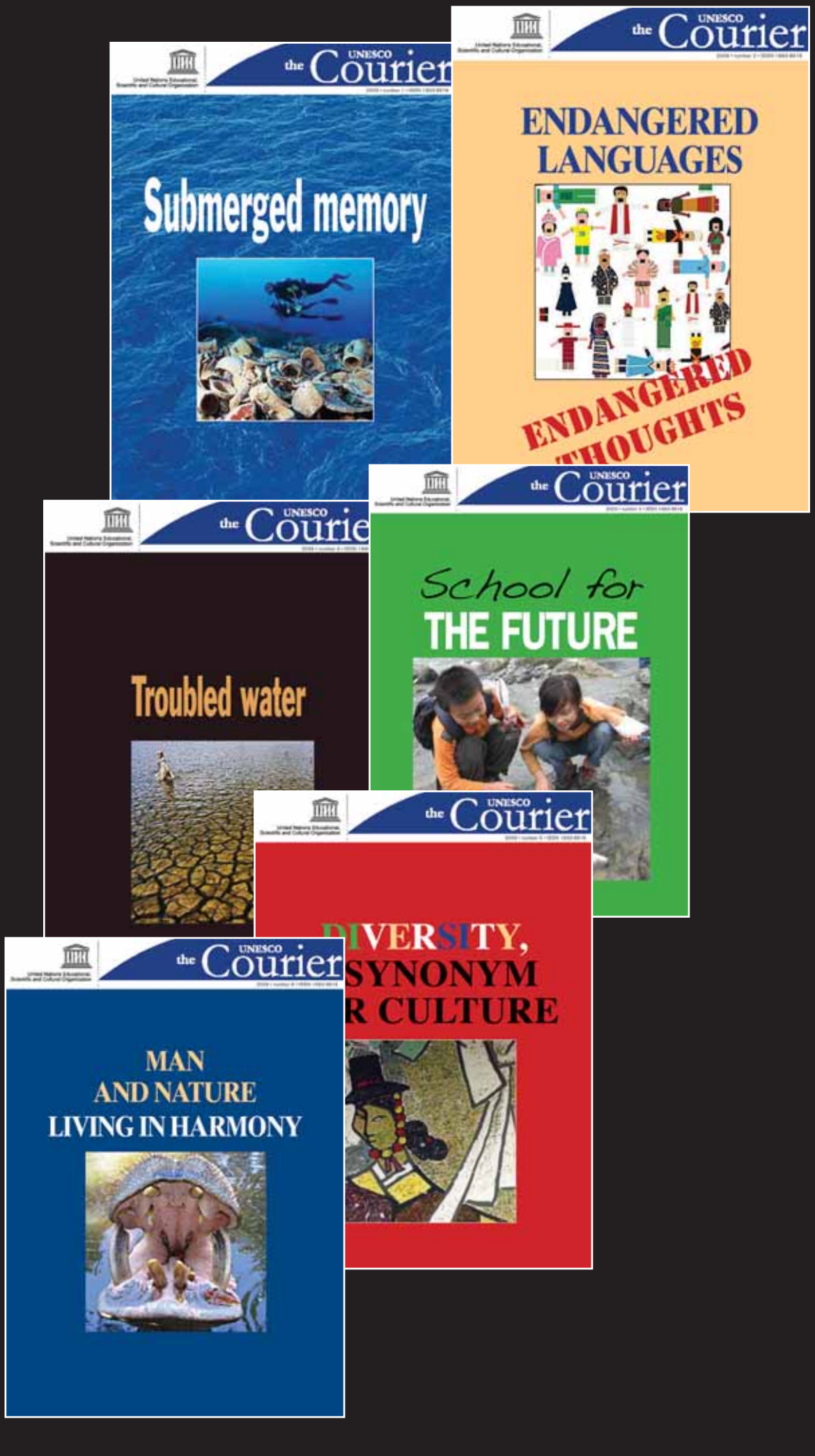
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